

# Transforming the Spirit of Learning: From Kindergarten to College

by Shelly Hudson Bowden

**N**ot long after leaving my kindergarten classroom for the college classroom, I began experiencing disequilibrium between my personal practical theories about teaching and learning and my actual practice as a new college teacher. As a former teacher of young children, I strongly believe in Dewey's concept of the democratic classroom. The five- and six-year-olds who came into my class brought with them a fresh eagerness to learn and experience. My role as their teacher, I believed, was to encourage them to explore ideas and propose solutions to dilemmas that affected them and their understanding of the world.

Exploration of any kind, however, means taking risks. Fortunately, kindergartners have yet to learn about the impact of grades and evaluations. However, as they mature, they almost certainly will be reshaped into students who compete for grades and other external rewards. They will, in fact, resemble many of my college-aged students whose

focus is on their final grades instead of on their experience as students in the course.

### The Problem: Disequilibrium

In reasoning my way through the problem of disequilibrium, I discovered that, while my college students resonated toward these external rewards or grades, I was their coconspirator. For example, the first syllabus I generated reflected the distance I had traveled from kindergarten to college teacher. Instead of collaborating on a proposed topic of interest for study or asking for student input regarding evaluation, I simply decided what would be taught and how it would be evaluated.

Although these teaching methods are common across disciplines in higher education, I struggled with my fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning as I tried to understand how my students would learn to work with kindergarten-aged children without experiencing firsthand democratic and collaborative learning. While some might argue that preservice



teachers will find democratic and collaborative environments during their student teaching, I believe that they need to experience this environment much earlier in their educational sequence. Therefore, I have recreated the “spirit of learning” in my college classroom based on those personal practical theories I believed in so strongly as a former kindergarten teacher.

### Core Beliefs

Teachers' personal beliefs and practices, naturally, are continually formulated and

---

*Shelly Hudson Bowden is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at Auburn University–Montgomery in Alabama. Her interests include mentoring and creating effective classroom cultures. She is a member of the Pi Pi Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi and may be contacted at shudson@snowhill.com.*

reexamined (Zeichner and Liston 1996) and are shaped by experiences (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). These are my current core beliefs:

- Students should contribute to planning, learning, and self-evaluation (Routman 1991).
- Students must be immersed in and given time to practice the knowledge they are learning in a safe, risk-taking environment (Goodman 1986).
- Students and teachers must have and build upon common respect.

## Creating a Model

My role as a college teacher began with writing a course syllabus. Accepting the role of a traditional college instructor, I decided what material to present in lecture format, planned corresponding assignments, and assigned percentages for paper-and-pencil evaluations. I was prepared for my first day of class, yet grew increasingly uncomfortable with this new level of control.

In reflection, as a kindergarten teacher, I saw my students as collaborators in planning, teaching, and self-evaluation. While mindful of state-mandated courses of study, I let my students' interests lead me to include related learning activities. Yet, I had not considered implementing the same type of collaboration in my college classroom. My personal practical theories prompted me to search for ways to model my underlying beliefs in a college classroom.

## Getting Student Input

Before teaching my first college class, I removed six out of the ten percentages I had desig-

nated for assignments. On the first day of class, I invited students to help determine the missing percentages. By including their ideas, I aimed to portray collaborative planning and self-evaluation—both practices I hoped they would share one day with their own students.

I recall my disappointment when one future teacher responded, "You want us to do what?" On every day of each new semester, I face the same confused faces. However, as they learn to accept their new roles, students begin to see their participation as valuable and collaborative classroom experiences.

To promote ownership in learning, I also include students in a Menu of Learning assignment. Students choose topics that relate textbook material to personal research interests. During a kindergarten unit about insects, for example, one student chose ladybug books to read, while another student investigated ants. Students worked to create stories or artwork that showcased the insect and their habitats to share with the class.

In the model transformed for the college level, students choose to participate in school visitations, read additional educational books or journals, and interview teachers. Modeling collaboration, I work closely with students to streamline personal objectives as they relate to class material. Students outline their projects and propose evaluations of the additional knowledge they will learn and share with classmates.

Whether in the kindergarten or college classroom, I maintain control over the developmental appropriateness of planning and

learning. For example, when given a choice in total planning, kindergarten students might select "playground" for their 8-to-3 daily schedule. Thus, in the college classroom, I selectively ask my students for input so that they direct their own learning, within designated parameters.

## Immersing Students in Knowledge

My second core belief is that students must be immersed in the knowledge they are learning. Additionally, the teacher must provide classroom time for students to practice what they have learned in a safe, risk-taking environment. To achieve these goals, I follow Cambourne's (1988) conditions of learning—a model that comprises immersion, demonstration, expectation, responsibility, use, approximation, and response. Engagement with learning connects these components.

In my kindergarten classroom, the components were accomplished through shared, guided, and independent practice with reading and writing activities. The classroom environment provided students opportunities to practice their learning with a print-rich collection of wall stories and student work. My young students maintained responsibility in their learning as I supported their attempts by accepting their developmentally appropriate approximations (Bredenkamp and Copple 1997). Students felt successful because they saw their attempts at learning as positive experiences, and they learned that their mistakes could teach them just as much as their successes.

These conditions of learning at the college level are accomplished by providing opportunities for students to be immersed in curriculum issues. As new teachers, they will be given curriculum guides, teacher editions, and grade-level notebooks filled with the material they will teach. To provide practical experiences with planning curriculum, my students and I work together in small groups, as they will in grade-level meetings, to analyze, synthesize, teach, and evaluate the content of our college textbook material. Given the opportunity to teach material by any method, they quickly realize the advantages of hands-on learning over lectures. In addition, they are encouraged to invite community speakers to class.

In my kindergarten classroom, I saw my role as a facilitator of learning. I continue to model this role for my college students. When a student gives a presentation, I become a group participant, offering ideas for organizing, planning, and teaching material. I maintain a growing list of community speakers and resources. I also suggest ways, beyond paper-and-pencil evaluations, to assess student learning.

Time management for new teachers is one of their greatest challenges. Many times, when given time allotments for sharing information, students end up with either too much or not enough material to teach. In other situations, lessons do not go as smoothly as planned. I accept both situations and always am ready to step in as a co-teacher.

During one class, for example, an Early Childhood video describing the work of Piaget

malfunctioned. My students looked a bit confused when I told them I was happy that this had happened! I explained that this is the kind of experience that teaches a teacher to be prepared with back-up plans, and then proceeded to present the material I had previewed from the video.

Personal practice theories serve as the foundation for all experiences within the classroom.

### Building Respect

My last personal-practice theory involves respecting my students, from kindergarten to college. I accomplish this goal by giving up classroom control and seeing my students as participants in planning, learning, teaching, and evaluation.

Demonstrating collaboration and respect for student ability begins with examining your own personal-practice theories of learning. I have learned:

- Moving toward a more student-directed learning environment means that I have given up control while empowering my students' learning.
- Preservice teachers need to see themselves and their students as lifelong learners. I also accept myself as a learner.
- Student feedback is my powerful and most helpful teaching evaluation. My students' thoughts and ideas challenge me to rethink my teaching and guide my practices.

### Reflections

I have found that college students appreciate professors who model the dynamics of a collaborative classroom. One student wrote:

*We practiced peer collaboration, time management, self-evaluation, and, most importantly, respect. I will now see my students as collaborators in learning. I will trust my students' ideas, like you trusted ours. I'm ready to try out my role as teacher, and I see myself as a lifelong learner.*

I believe that the challenge of teaching and learning methods in education preservice programs begins when the instructor constantly examines his or her personal set of core beliefs about teaching and learning. These personal-practice theories serve as the foundation for all experiences within the classroom environment. In the final analysis, college instructors should take the very best practice from their earlier experiences as classroom teachers and apply that practice in their college classroom environments for preservice teachers. These core beliefs underscore the importance of a theory-into-practice model, which can transform the spirit of learning.

### References

- Bredekamp, S., and C. Copple, eds. 1997. *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs*, rev. ed. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Cambourne, B. 1988. *The whole story: Natural learning and the acquisition of literacy in the classroom*. New York: Scholastic.
- Connelly, F. M., and D. J. Clandinin. 1990. Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher* 19(5): 2-14.
- Goodman, K. S. 1986. *What's whole in whole language?* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Routman, R. 1991. *Invitations: Changing as teacher and learners K-12*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Zeichner, K. M., and D. P. Liston. 1996. *Reflective teaching: An introduction*. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates.